

BOOKS

The Worst of Both Worlds

WITH that bulldog tenacity which excites a universal awe, that incomparably obstinate, persistent, and unyielding fixedness of mind, the British people seem to have set themselves resolutely to choose the worst of both worlds. This is true in economics, where they are sufficiently socialistic to prevent the capitalist system from working at its best, but insufficiently so to allow any socialist order to operate. It is true in military affairs, where they are too weak to move easily as a Great Power, and too strong (now having the Bomb) to enjoy the relative freedom of action of a small one. It is true in education, where they are too proud to "lower standards" so as to allow for mass higher education, but not humble enough to be satisfied with the present mechanism that produces a small, well-trained élite. Above all, perhaps, it is true in the sphere of culture to which they deny private philanthropy (by virtue of heavy taxation) while begrudging public support, and which they protect from the importunities of commercialism while withholding from it the subsidies that would permit it otherwise to survive.

The recent decision of the B.B.C. to emasculate its Third Programme and Home Service in favour of light entertainment can only be understood against this background. It certainly cannot be understood in and of itself, and the B.B.C. has yet to present any kind of comprehensible defence of its new course. Its statements have been bland, vague, and slightly sinister—"reassurances" that have prompted T. S. Eliot to remark: "I am always filled with alarm when I read a public statement by anyone in authority, the sense of which I fail utterly to grasp." And, really, what could it say? There is no real premeditation behind its action; only the dark, compulsive repetition of a disastrous habit, which, refusing to choose between evils, takes the pair.

As things now stand, the B.B.C. is on the way to denying the grounds of its very existence, under the plea that it must do this to survive.

If it is primarily light entertainment that is to be distributed, what on earth does one want a government monopoly for? It would be more sensible to make radio commercial and competitive: the entertainment would be more lavish, since the advertising agencies have more money to spend on this than does the Treasury, and it needn't cost the listener a penny in licence fees. More important: some of the programmes at least would probably be on a much higher level, assuming that the thoroughly commercial American system of sponsored broadcasting were adopted; many of the giant industrial firms, for whom advertising is primarily a matter of creating goodwill, would be pleased to have their names associated with symphonies, operas, good drama, and other programmes that reach an influential—if small—part of the population.

On the other hand, there is everything to be said for the continuance of the B.B.C. monopoly *if* it justifies itself in terms of its educational mission. This mission is not merely to help improve men's minds. It is far weightier than that. It is to serve as a standing proof that men's minds can be improved, and a perpetual reminder that they ought to be improved. Just how necessary this reminder is, may be gathered from a recent incident. In the current proceedings against the London Library, whose tax-exempt status the Board of Inland Revenue is challenging, the representative of this Board, a Mr. S. R. Davies, said:

"Is it [The London Library] really concerned with the advancement of literature, or is it concerned with providing a magnificent collection of books in dignified surroundings—and with the great advantage of members being allowed to take them home—in order that cultured persons may enjoy their kind of amusement in the way that less cultured persons enjoy going to football matches?"

There is nothing uniquely English about this

attitude; it may even be described as the common one. But there *is* something uniquely English and uncommon about the B.B.C.—or, rather, there has been until now.

There can be no doubt of the B.B.C.'s past achievement. As Mr. Peter Laslett points out,* it has been "the most successful of all 20th-century British institutions," though it might not occur to many people to think so. Anyone who has to do with Americans and Europeans will have perceived how deeply they admire it—especially the Third Programme—and how generous is their estimate of the present level and vitality of British culture as a result. Many of them have, of course, never heard the B.B.C. or the Third Programme. But that doesn't prevent them from speaking about it in glowing terms. (One might say it helps.) Indeed, this fact makes nonsense of the Director-General's statement that "in face of rising costs, large circulations become of first importance." The truth is that large circulations are of *no* importance, so far as the B.B.C.'s educational function is concerned. The Third Programme would still be a bargain at its present paltry cost of one million pounds a year—a fraction of what the Soviet Government spent on the recent World Youth Festival—if *no one* listened, just so long as everyone knew it was there. It would still hold up to the British people a cultural measure by which the cheap, the trivial, the superficial could be measured. It would still represent a great British achievement in the eyes of a world that is perplexedly facing the lowering of cultural standards by what are called "the popular arts." The prestige accruing to this country would still be of a magnitude and intensity unpurchasable by any other means. Were the Third Programme only a pure fiction, it would nevertheless unquestionably be to British advantage to sustain the fiction as long as possible.

We all know that people like Mr. Davies do exist in England, and that there are even many of them to be found in positions of high authority. But, oddly enough, foreigners do not know this. Hearing of the existence of the Third Programme, they assume that England is a land where culture is officially encouraged and learning officially respected. They look to this country with a special kind of fondness and loving envy. The word "British" becomes associated with things of fine quality; the London weeklies, *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, are dutifully subscribed to by people who wish to partake vicariously of this

superior society. Ought we to disillusion them? Is it good politics, even? We know how miserly British Authority is when it comes to cultural affairs, how stodgily uncomprehending. We know that Britain spends not much more for the support of the arts than the German province of Hesse. But can't it be kept a family secret?

Irving Kristol

SYMBOLISTS AND MODERNS

Romantic Image. By FRANK KERMODE. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 18s.

MODERN poetics is a confused affair. The most eminent of living women poets, whose work has been known for thirty years, is reviewed in two Sunday papers of the same date: in one of them she is celebrated as the most essentially poetic genius of the century: in the other she is described as an inflated elegant trifler. Both reviewers know and care for poetry, in their ways. Can there ever have been a time when notions of what poetry is about have been so various and so vague? Contemporary criticism is a jungle, and this is not altogether the critics' fault; in earlier times they would have been working within a pretty generally agreed frame of literary ideas. And now there is none. The critical assumptions on which the poets work are mutually contrary; and the assumptions on which they say they are working are often contradicted by the poetry itself. A good deal has been heard in the last forty years about classicism as a basis for 20th-century poetry; indeed the whole thing begins with an anti-romantic flare-up started by T. E. Hulme and others. But there is nothing remotely neo-classical in the actual poetry of the age; and it has always been obvious to anyone who reads poetry with any attention that the real motive force behind the poetical revolution of the early part of this century was French Symbolism, mediated in various ways.

This is the background of Mr. Kermode's admirable study. He has gone a step further by showing that the Symbolist indoctrination was more fundamental than had been supposed and that the presuppositions that stand behind modern poetry are in fact the same as the Symbolist ones. They look different because they have been given a new philosophical disguise, but they are the same; and the same therefore in essentials as the old Romantic ones. Symbolism is an extension of the Romantic idea, and modern poetry simply represents its last phase. This could be just a chapter of literary history, but as it is handled in *Romantic Image* it is a

* In his contribution to the pamphlet *Unsound Broadcasting: The Case Against the B.B.C.'s New Policy*. Distributed for the Sound Broadcasting Society by Faber and Faber. 1s.